

ANARCHISTS IN THE SPANISH REVOLUTION

by **Sam Dolgoff**

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In 1974, or early 1975, I reviewed in the English anarchist paper *Freedom* a book by Carlos Semprun Maura, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Catalonia* (French edition). In my review I criticized both Semprun Maura and Vernon Richards' book *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* for presenting a distorted, over-simplified interpretation of events- a scenario. This provoked a heated rejoinder from Richards (three or four articles in *Freedom*).

Over forty years after the tragic defeat of the Spanish Revolution - 1936 to 1939 - the question of anarchist participation in the Republican government and the role of anarchists in a revolution is a fundamental problem still debated- still relevant. I include my polemic with Richards in these memoirs because of the emotional impact of these stormy years and the great extent to which these events influenced my thinking and the course of my life.

Since Richards' main source for his criticism of the anti-anarchist policies of the CNT-FAI governmental participation - are the anti-participation historians Jose Peirats and Gaston Leval (Leval's *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* was translated by Richards), I refer, in the main, to both Peirats and Leval *to refute his contentions*. Richards writes like a prosecuting attorney, but I do not consider myself a lawyer for the defense. No one can be altogether objective but I have done my best to present a well-documented, impartial analysis of the issues involved.

Both Semprun Maura's and Richards' "bete noir" is the CNT-FAI "bureaucracy." For them, the "bureaucracy" is to a great extent responsible for the defeat of the anarchist revolution. That a "few officials became infected with the virus of power" (as Leval puts it) is true enough. But to charge that the CNT degenerated into a virtual bureaucratic dictatorship is a gross exaggeration, bordering on slander.

Richards' attempt to refute my statement that the CNT was so structured as to reduce the danger of bureaucracy to a minimum only shows that he does not know what he is talking about. He

inadvertently admits that he has no real evidence to substantiate the existence of the alleged "bureaucracy": "I have never seen detailed accounts of the composition [of the bureaucracy], its role, or whether [the bureaucrats] are paid or unpaid...."

Abel Paz, who fought in the Revolution, in his eyewitness account, *Durruti: The People Armed* (pp. 244-5), tells how Durruti, always alert to the dangers of bureaucracy, investigated:

...the national headquarters of the CNT were not centralized. All the people working in the national headquarters and in the organization were employed, not by the National Committee, but were elected by and accountable to the plant assemblies. They were paid not by the National Committee, but by enterprises in which they were employed....

Both Augustin Souchy, who administered the Foreign Information Bureau of the CNT, and one of his coworkers, Abe Bluestein, of New York, told me that everyone working in the National Headquarters from responsible officials to porters and maintenance workers were paid the same equal wages. Durruti and others who investigated were convinced that there was no bureaucracy in the CNT anywhere.

The contention that the anarchist "leaders" joined the Catalan "Generalidad" government without consulting the members is also false. Peirats, in an interview with John Brademas (12 September 1952) informed him that the decision to join the "Generalidad" government was adopted by a vast majority vote in the Plenum of Local and District Federations. (*Anarcho-Syndicalism and Revolution in Spain*, Spanish translation, pp. 211, 214).

As I write these lines I read a review by my old friend and comrade Abe Bluestein further emphasizing this point:

...and I saw equally strong commitment to anarchist principles in Barcelona. I saw a regional meeting of the CNT with more than 500 representatives affirm the policy of participating in the government of Catalonia. At the same time, they voted to continue financial support to the Libertarian Youth of Catalonia who opposed such government collaboration publicly in their uncensored leaflets and pamphlets distributed throughout the city. [*Social Anarchism* No. 7, P. 9]

The accusation that there was no control from below is emphatically denied by Gaston Leval in his chapter on libertarian democracy. Leval, after describing in meticulous detail the democratic libertarian procedures embedded in the nature and structure of libertarian

organization, declares that libertarian procedures, the fullest people's direct grass-roots democracy, were practiced

...in ALL the syndicates THROUGHOUT SPAIN. In ALL trades and industries. In assemblies which in Barcelona brought together - hundreds of thousands of workers.... In ALL the collectivized villages... which comprised at least 60% of Republican Spain's agriculture. [*Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, Freedom Press, p. 206- Leval's emphasis]

In its report to the Extraordinary Congress of the International Workers' Association (IWA-anarchosyndicalist), the National Committee of the CNT refuted charges that the National Committee violated anarchist federalist principles by imposing its own decisions on the rank-and-file local and regional organizations. The decision to join the Catalan government "Generalidad" was ratified by plenums of local, district and regional committees in August 1936 and the decision to join the central government was ratified in a national plenum of regions in Madrid on 28 September 1936 (the CNT actually entered the government on 6 November 1936). From 19 July 1936 to 26 November 1937, seventeen regional plenums and dozens of local plenums and district federations were called as well as various regional congresses of unions. (See Jose Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, pp. 185, 186.)

The replacement of the brutal professional police, the Civil Assault Guards, far from being as Richards contends an "...example of a politicized bureaucracy," constitutes one of the truly great achievements of the revolution. His own evidence contradicts his charge that the patrols received orders from the government. The patrols were chosen not by the government but by the people themselves: "various organizations and parties, CNT-FAI, UGT etc...." (Richards)

Richards and other critics do not seem to grasp the magnitude of the tragic dilemma of our comrades, the Spanish anarchists. The libertarian movement was hopelessly trapped between the cruel choice of collaboration with its anti-fascist enemies, thereby violating the principles of anarchism, or trying to establish an anarchist dictatorship over all the other anti-fascist organizations, an obvious impossibility and even greater violation of anarchism, or accepting, at least partially, the awesome historic responsibility for a fascist victory.

What the CNT-FAI should or should not have done in such desperate circumstances is, of course, debatable. What is *not* debatable is that

there *is* a dilemma. I criticized Semprun Maura because he called this, the most crucial problem of the Spanish Revolution, "a false dilemma" and I criticized Richards because he labelled it "Dolgoff's dilemma."

"Dolgoff's dilemma" is, however, shared by Gaston Leval, Jose Peirats and almost all other anticollaborationists as well as *all* responsible non-anarchist writers on Spain. Leval graphically portrays the tragic, heartbreaking situation that our comrades had to face far more truthfully, with far greater understanding than Richards and the "pure" anarchist critics:

All those among the anarchists preoccupied primarily with the revolutionary question oversimplified and overestimated the political problem. The Social Revolution, they believed, would sweep away the state and the other entrenched authoritarian institutions... but the necessity of fighting the war against fascism upset these expectations....

While the state was severely crippled after the fascist attack of 19 July 1936, it was by no means as impotent as is generally assumed. All the machinery of the state was still intact; the ministries, and their officials, a police force, an army though weakened, and the entrenched bureaucracy still survived... notwithstanding the over-optimism of the revolutionaries, the state still constituted an effective force in many provinces and cities... it was only in three or four cities (Barcelona was the most important) that the anarchists dominated the situation, and then only for three or four weeks... it is therefore fallacious to assume that the anarchists were the masters of the situation....

Another serious problem was that in all of Eastern Spain there were no arms factories, no raw materials, no iron or coal. The principal arms factories were in fascist territory....

It is obvious that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make the Revolution under such circumstances... it became necessary to collaborate with our anti-fascist enemies against the much more dangerous common enemy. We could not sweep away the political parties controlling the municipalities, who with equal fervor were fighting with the anarchists against fascism. [see Leval, *Ni Franco- Ne Stalin*, pp. 76, 94]

Richard ignores a most revealing passage in Peirats' *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* (English translation, p. 188):

We all understood perfectly that leading to the period of collaboration was a chain of events that placed the CNT in a helpless situation... the only alternative of those who consistently opposed collaboration with the government... was a heroic *defeat*... they could offer no solution that would simultaneously preserve victory in the war against fascism; progress in the revolution; complete loyalty to their ideas and the preservation of their own lives... they lacked the power to perform miracles... [my emphasis]

The situation was all the more aggravated by the fact that the millions of sincere rank-and-file workers, socialists belonging to the Socialist Party-controlled General Workers Union (UGT), republicans, Catalan and Basque separatists, petit-bourgeois peasant owners, etc., by far outnumbered the CNT-FAI members. Gaston Leval emphasizes this point:

The vast majority of the population living in the republican part of Spain were, above all, dominated by the fear of a fascist victory. They did not understand why all the political parties and social movements did not constitute a united anti-fascist front regardless of their ideological differences. The people wanted the CNT and the much less important FAI to join the united front government which was, for them, absolutely necessary to guarantee the defeat of fascism.... [*Collectives In the Spanish Revolution*, Freedom Press, p. 322]

Nor were all the members of the CNT convinced, uncompromising anarchists. They, too, insisted that the CNT should collaborate with the anti-fascist parties and even enter the government. On this important point Peirats takes issue with Richards: "realities are and always will be more decisive than philosophical speculation.... It is unrealistic to expect absolute fidelity to principles in an organization like the CNT, numbering millions...."

Leval explodes the myth that the CNT-FAI "bureaucracy" supinely capitulated to the counter-revolutionary Republican government:

The leaders of the CNT-FAI, first of all, did what they could not to give in [join the government-S.D.]. They were undoubtedly inspired by their traditional opposition to all governmentalism... and all government parties. But in the face of the growing danger [fascist victory-S.D.] the greatest unification possible was needed. They thought up a revolutionary solution: the government should be replaced by a Defense Council of five members, five from the UGT, four from the republican parties, five members of the CNT. In this way they sought to make clear the supremacy of workers' syndical organizations over the political parties. [Ibid., p. 322]

The CNT proposal was made not by the "leaders," but only after thorough discussion by the National Plenum of Regions in Madrid, 3 September 1936. The proposal was published in the CNT and republican press.

Needless to say the proposal was rejected by the 1,200,000 Socialist Party-controlled labor union UGT and also rejected by the political parties. Leval, in my opinion, was absolutely right in making a distinction between an ordinary parliamentary government of political parties and one conducted by a coalition of genuine labor organizations, not by any means a perfect libertarian solution, but one in which workers' organizations certainly exercise a greater measure of control.

Leval also notes that the successful organization of the libertarian collectives was to a great extent undoubtedly due to the fact that in Granollers, Gerona, Hospitalet, Valencia and many other centers the mayors were libertarians and they expedited social transformation (ibid., p. 281). Since the CNT was forced to collaborate with other anti-fascists in village, municipal and provincial governments, it stands to reason that it was just as unanarchistic as participating in the national government. If I were a consistent anti-collaborationist I would oppose collaboration not only in the central government but also its subdivisions, without which any government is inconceivable.

Leval even goes so far as to defend a libertarian proposal to establish a national state financed health insurance fund:

That libertarians should have thought of such a solution which implies the recognition of the existence of the state... may surprise - and shock the theoreticians who ignore the practical facts.... As we have repeated many times, we were in a mixed and most complicated situation in which private capital and individual property persisted, in which the socialized economy paid taxes, etc.... In this situation many activities escaped our control.... [ibid., p. 273]

In respect to the refusal of the anarchists to "take power," for which the Trotskyites and assorted "Marxist-Leninists" also criticized them, Leval remarks:

It only needs a modicum of common sense to realize that it was quite impossible for us to wage war against the other anti-fascist sectors who would not allow themselves to be wiped out so easily. It would have been a nonsense and a crime.... [ibid., p. 82]

These quotations (and the anti-participationist literature is filled with more) read like justifications for governmental participation. There are undoubtedly quotations from the same sources refuting such statements. But these contradictions reflect the tragic dilemma of our valiant comrades. What is most disturbing is Richards' refusal to take these facts into account, instead misleading his readers by concocting a false account of the situation in Spain: selecting and twisting only the kind of "facts" which support his baseless arguments and accusations.

Although both Leval and Peirats were strongly opposed to governmental participation, the case for the CNT participation policy could not be better stated. Their willingness to give full consideration to policies they did not agree with earned my lasting respect. I sincerely regret that I could not feel the same way about Richards' shabby, ungenerous presentation.

Richards believes that the Spanish anarchists, instead of joining the united front republican government, should have abandoned the fight against Franco fascism and lived to "fight another day." He admits that "...such a course could well have ended in defeat in the first few weeks." when it was by no means certain that the fascists would win and hopes for final victory ran high. The anarchists would rightly be accused of cowardice and held responsible for the disastrous defeat by the masses who at that time were by no means ready to surrender.

Richards himself admits that the "...revolutionary expectations still ran high and the people still armed..."

This absurd strategy is based upon the unrealistic notion that the million and a half members of the CNT would accept such a proposal of the anarchists. There is very good reason to believe that the CNT members would indignantly refuse to be moved around like checkers at the behest of the "pure" anarchists. Without the CNT the comparative handful of anarchists would lose their influence and finally become an impotent sect absolutely incapable of meaningful action. The anarchist historian Peirats, for example, makes clear that while the anarchists did influence the CNT, the CNT made the "anarchists into its own image... provided them with a sphere of action, masses and positions of leadership... the anarchists were run by the union...." (*Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 239) In a great many situations the CNT, instead of implementing the policies of the anarchists, acted independently.

Anarchists desperately searching for a practical anarchist alternative to governmental participation cite the example of the heroic exploits

of the Nestor Makhno anarchist guerrilla movement in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution as an example to be followed by the CNT-FAI. But they ignore the fact that this heroic movement was crushed and Makhno himself barely escaped abroad, a mortally sick man, to die in despair in Paris.

The perennial problem of what should be the role of anarchists in a revolutionary period is always relevant. Many are the lessons to be learned from both the mistakes and the achievements of our comrades; from the tragic events in Spain and its international repercussions manifested in the outbreak of the World War. Regrettably, neither Richards nor too many others have provided a reasonable basis for discussion.